

faits malaccomplis

FAITS MALACCOMPLIS AND THE ORIGINS OF CRISIS

A number of apparently dissimilar international crises share a common origin: the partly unsuccessful or failed attempt by the leader of one state to confront an opponent or ally or a sector of his own society with a fait accompli: what one might call a fait malaccompli.

From this attempt, and its failure, a remarkable number of standard consequences flow with relatively high probability, so that these particular crises (which tend rarely to be examined together because of their disparities in other respects) show a rich collection of similarities when compared in detail.

Moreover, these common features, examined together for a particular crisis, show an inner coherence, a logic, that betrays causal relationships; there seems to be a basis for a theory of this sub-class of crises. Yet these relationships seem ill-understood by the experienced "crisis managers" in the various governments; for these incidents are generally accompanied by shocking surprises--on both sides--at the time, and by persistent puzzlement afterwards. Thus this sub-class is a particularly enticing subject for analysis: though no such analysis, to my knowledge, yet exists in print.

The tactical goal of producing a fait accompli--the effort to surprise a well-informed and powerful state, so that it is unready to respond quickly and effectively to a move against its own interests, thereby dissuading it from responding at all--imposes severe tactical requirements, so that the "moves" and circumstances leading up to the overt crises in this class almost inevitably show many similarities: totally unremarked elsewhere, so far as I have been able to discover. What is even less recognized--either by observers or by participants, at the time or later--is the causal impact of many of these features upon the later course of events.

An analysis seems overdue of the incentives and pressures that generate attempted faits accomplis, the problems of achieving them, and the risks to which they give rise in succeeding or failing.

WHY FAITS ACCOMPLIS? and HOW TO ACHIEVE THEM

An action against the interests (or preference or desire or policy) of another party may have some more or less well-defined interval of vulnerability, during which it can be opposed or counteracted with relative ease and effectiveness. The problem is to prevent any sort of response by the opposed party during this vulnerable period so that party, if and when it eventually contemplates opposition, if confronts alternatives that are all relatively ineffective, costly, or risky, a prospect--it is hoped--that will discourage it from reacting at all.

One way to understand the operational goals of a fait accompli is to conceive it as aimed at producing a change in the status quo, against the interests of the opposing state, without creating a crisis for the leaders of that opposing state.

In this context, we may think of a "crisis" as an urgent search by policymakers for means to influence or prevent a threatening, undesired change. An energetic search presupposes some hope of success in finding an adequate solution.

The fait accompli is intended to abort this search, by confronting the opposing decisionmakers, not with a challenge, but with a hopeless situation, one in which their interests are damaged but which they are powerless to restore to the old status quo or which they can oppose only with measures that seem obviously too risky, too costly, or too ineffective to be worth considering.

Success in the fait accompli consists in (a) convincing the opposing leadership--despite their surprise, shock, disappointment, and their consciousness of suffering a serious setback--that it is hopeless or clearly unprofitable even to try to reverse the damaging move, and (b) to convince them of this immediately or very quickly, before the urgent and serious search for effective action that constitutes a crisis fully develops.

Indeed, if the opposing leaders arrive quickly at this conclusion, they can be expected to try to reduce the domestic political consequences of the national reverse for themselves, by deprecating the significance of the move, or their right to oppose it, or even by interpreting it as a desirable change: thus, no challenge to them nor a "crisis" for their nation.

If, on the contrary, they do define it as a crisis--even internally, encouraging their staffs to look for ways and to mobilize means to counter it--and especially if they do so publicly and actually mount opposition, the tactic of the fait accompli has to some degree failed.

FAILURE OF THE FAIT ACCOMPLI AS CRISIS

This goal--of bringing about a change against the interests of another party without creating a sense of crisis, or a major attempt at response in that party--accounts for the dominant tactics of the fait accompli: speed, secrecy, and deception.

These three characteristics aim at producing a surprise for the opponent. And this aim is related to the need, in the period preceding revelation of the surprise, to reduce or hold down to a low level, his state of alert and mobilization, thus his readiness to respond effectively in time.

The basis for these requirements is that: (a) states (like all big organizations) take a significantly long time to respond to a perceived threat or change in the environment; (b) the length of this time depends on many factors of "readiness" and alert status, which depend on (c) the prior expectations of decision-makers, which (d) can be manipulated by opposing actions and declarations and d is why this failure occurs so often, so violently, and so surprisingly to the initiator, as it does. In particular, we must consider how factors intrinsic to the tactics contribute to the likelihood, the intensity, and the lack of anticipation of its failure.

The form of failure we shall examine is one in which secrecy and deception are effective as long, or almost as long, as originally intended, but in which the opponent--precisely because that secrecy and deception have led him to make commitments, predictions or reassurances that have now made him politically vulnerable--instead of accepting the situation, strives to rise to the occasion and acts angrily and violently to counter or punish the move. [That is the story of Kennedy's response to the Soviet missiles in Cuba, and George Bush's response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.]